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Women's portraits of the self

"Ignorant and intractable"

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1 The woman’s self-portrait under examination here is not framed as such. Instead, it takes shape in the dialogical space established within a philosophical correspondence – he product of a series of depictions that work together to create an image of one of the participants in the exchange as part of the construction of a shared knowledge. Elisabeth, the Princess Palatine of Bohemia who lived from 1618 to 1680, is essentially known to the seventeenth – century history of ideas for the correspondence that she cultivated with Descartes from 1643 until his death in 1649, a period during which she lived in exile following the overthrow of her father Frederick V. This correspondence played a very important role in the evolution of Descartes’ thought, guided as it was by questions from Elisabeth that promoted a rearticulation of soul and body as united within the human being – a theoretical reorientation that produced *The Passions of the Soul*, published in 1649.

2 Our goal here is to show that, if the contribution of Elisabeth to the correspondence produced this result, it is largely thanks to her deployment of a representation of herself that places a high priority on the body – both the social body to which she belongs and her own physical body. Evoking her own singular experience, she paradoxically grounds her coherence and credibility as a philosophical interlocutor in two seemingly unflattering epithets: “ignorant and intractable”. We will demonstrate how, despite their apparently negative relationship to knowledge, these two designations highlight the ambivalent function of the body in Elisabeth’s writing – a body that is at once, as a source of ignorance, an obstacle to the philosophical process, and, as a reality that resists theory, an unavoidable challenge to this same process.

The Correspondence: A Space of Parity

3 Elisabeth's self – portrait is inscribed both within the relationship between the princess and the philosopher and in the philosophical correspondence itself. In other words, the position and status of the two interlocutors structure the exchange on the one hand, and on the other are neutralized in order to guarantee the successful outcome of the correspondence. Thus, from the outset, each participant begins by implicitly accepting the portrait drawn of him or her by the other, in the process completing the image from his or her own point of view. Elisabeth both implicitly assumes her role as princess, and designates herself as a student:

> I learned, with much joy and regret, of the plan you had to see me [...]; I was touched equally by your charity in willing to share yourself with an ignorant and intractable person and by the bad luck that robbed me of such a profitable conversation.[...] The shame of showing you so disordered a style prevented me, up until now, for asking you for this favor by letter.[1] (p. 61-62).

4 Descartes, on his side, implicitly assumes *his* role as philosopher and designates himself as a simple subject: "The favor with which your Highness has honored me, in allowing me to receive her orders in writing, is greater than I would ever have dared to hope"[2] (p. 63). Within this framework, the dialogue is presented by both Elisabeth and Descartes as an exchange of favors, by means of which each recognizes the superiority of the other in the position that defines him or her initially, and emphasizes his or her own inferiority in this same context.

5 On the occasion of this sharing of abilities, Elisabeth describes herself in the first lines of the first letter as "ignorant and intractable", a deficient writer with a "disordered" style. She draws a self-portrait that is marked by a lack of ability – a weakness that becomes the motivation for an appeal itself marked by a pedagogical disparity: a student seeks out a teacher, the supposed bearer of a knowledge that the student herself does not have. In contrast, Descartes, as part of his recognition of the social position of his correspondent, does not delay in noting the relevance of her remarks and the acuity of her understanding. In this way a framework of mutual recognition is established above and beyond the possession of a particular kind of knowledge – a recognition of a shared aptitude for the exercise of reason that works to neutralize the initial social distinctions. This space of parity, forged in the correspondence, accounts for the quality and the longevity of the exchange.

6 Now, from the outset, Elisabeth takes up another discursive element – the therapeutic dimension of the exchange:

> Knowing that you are the best doctor for my soul, I expose to you quite freely the weaknesses of its speculations, and hope that in observing the Hippocratic oath, you will supply me with remedies without making them public.[3] (p. 62)

7 This transition into the realm of medicine allows her to mitigate in a more profound way the intellectual and social disparities that separate her from her correspondent: first, the doctor holds a kind of knowledge that the patient lacks, but he is also at her service; second, the doctor has the authority to make use of his tools, both theoretical and material, but it is the patient who guarantees their actual effectiveness, by putting them to the test of her own experience.

8 In a more formal sense, this type of relationship brings about a need for confidentiality, and highlights on the one hand the separation between an intimate and a public space both marked by social constraints, and on the other the break with the social hierarchies that the correspondents begin by acknowledging. In asking for this kind of protection for their exchange, Elisabeth dramatizes the larger question of the safety of the mail and the possibility that their letters might fall into the wrong hands. This subject is taken up several times, as in the postscript to the letter dated May 24, 1645:

> I realize now in what I send you, I am forgetting one of your maxims, which is never to put anything in writing which can be interpreted badly by less charitable readers. But I have enough faith in the care of M. de Palotti that I know that my letter will truly be delivered to you, and in your discretion that you will destroy it by fire, because of the danger that it will fall into evil hands.[4] (p. 91)

9 This concern even led the correspondents to consider the possibility of writing in code:

> I have examined the code that you sent me and found it very good, but too long to write a whole thought. And if one writes only a bit of a word, one would figure it out by the number of letters [...].[5] (p. 176)

10 But, crucially, where the content of the letters is concerned, this reference to the relationship between doctor and patient inflects the framing of the correspondence considerably. Indeed, it transforms deficiency and weakness into an object of research, rather than an obstacle to this research. In this context, the status of "ignorant and intractable" is not so much a position of inferiority that Elisabeth must move beyond as a challenge that Descartes must take up. And Descartes himself understands it in this way:

> I have a very great obligation to your Highness in that she, after having borne my explaining myself badly in my previous letter [...], deigns again to have the patience to listen to me on the same matter [i.e. clarifying the relationship among the three primitive notions: that of the soul; that of the body; and that of the union between soul and body]. That is, I think, all of what your Highness has prescribed me to do here.[6] (p. 69)

11 This reply shows a reversal of the prescription: the prescription of the doctor, with which he affirms his authority over the patient, is echoed by the prescription of the patient, in which she gives him an object, and invites him to embrace a philosophical rigor that is capable of taking account of this object in its singularity.

12 From here on out, the positioning of the exchange within a frame that is at once philosophical and therapeutic casts a different light on the self-portrait of Elisabeth as "ignorant and intractable": if the assertion of ignorance makes of her an inadequate disciple, hindered by her body in her quest for knowledge, her intractability renders her the spokesperson of a singular experience that resists and requires the modification of this very knowledge.

"Ignorant": The Body as Obstacle to Philosophy

13 Let us begin with ignorance. This characteristic, one of the first noted by Elisabeth in her representation of herself, is doubly linked to the domain of physicality. First, it emerges from her connection with a social body and the geographical constraints this body places on her; second, it is one of the attributes that are proper to her own individual body.

14 The self-portrait of Elisabeth thus presents her in context, as someone who, in her own words, does not "have occasion to do as I like"[7]. Elisabeth sees her thirst for knowledge

frustrated by the external conditions of her exile and her political circumstances, both of which put limits on her freedom of movement and make it difficult for her to use her time as she pleases, in particular by often preventing her from meeting with Descartes. She explains:

> [...] I would rescind the resolution I have made to return there [to Holland], if the interests of my family do not call me back, and I will wait here until the outcome of the treaties of Munster or some other treaty brings me back to my country."[8] (p. 162)

15 She reveals herself to be at the mercy of events that are beyond her control, and regularly frustrate her desire to be both in places propitious for study and in the presence of the person who could help her to overcome her ignorance. That which keeps her, despite herself, from making this kind of progress in this domain also manifests itself in the more intimate form of the family and of familial obligation: "[...] I do not at all see the electress, my aunt, being in the mood to permit my return [...]."[9] (p. 158)

16 But this constraint, imposed upon her by the social body to which she belongs, functions independently from the political circumstances that retain her in a particular geographical place. In fact, Elisabeth evokes the different aspects of court life that are incompatible with the full development of her philosophical quest for knowledge. This life is lived as a form of insincerity; Elisabeth evokes the "[...] false praise [...] in a place where the ordinary way of conversing has accustomed me to understand that people are incapable of giving one true praise [...]"[10] (p. 67), and she contrasts this empty flattery with the kind of relationship that the correspondence with Descartes offers. Furthermore, her condition as a princess in itself leaves her little time:

> Now the interests of my house, which I must not neglect, now some conversations and social obligations which I cannot avoid, beat down so heavily on this weak mind with annoyance or boredom, that it is rendered useless for anything else at all for a long time afterward: this will serve, I hope, as an excuse for my stupidity in being unable to comprehend[11]. [...] (p. 67-68)

17 Even should she work to fortify her "weak mind", she describes herself as the prisoner of a structural conflict from which, she notes with admiration, others are capable of escaping, as she has heard is the case for Christina, Queen of Sweden:

> But I wonder how it is possible for this princess to apply herself to study as she does and to the affairs of the kingdom as well, two occupations that are so different, each of which demand an entire person.[12] (p. 181)

18 This incompatibility frequently translates itself into the mention of interruptions that prevent Elisabeth from concentrating on the philosophical work represented by the examination of her experience in her letters to Descartes:

> It has been eight days since the bad humor of a sick brother prevented me from making this request of you [...].[13] (p. 101)
> [...] I am constrained to abide by the impertinent established laws of civility so that I do not acquire any enemies. Since I began writing this letter I have been interrupted more than seven times [...].[14] (p. 115)

19 These elements of the self-portrait of Elisabeth as an exiled princess show that the inclusion of the individual in the social body works as an obstacle to the development of philosophical research and contributes to the position of ignorance that she refers to in her self-characterization. But this is not all. This external constraint reflects an internal and individual constraint that is linked to the physical body:

> But I confess that I find it difficult to separate from the senses and the imagination those things that are continuously represented to them in conversation and in letters, so that I do not know how to avoid them without sinning against my duty.[15] (p. 93)

20 A difficulty that exists apart from the duties inherent in her position is here rendered insurmountable by them. It takes considerable effort to separate the mind from the bodily circumstances in which it operates, even for a person with as much talent for metaphysical speculation as Elisabeth has, according to Descartes.

21 Thus the princess presents her ignorance in its relationship to causes that she finds in her own person, thereby completing her portrait with the addition of her own bodily attributes: she is a woman, and she is sick. A gendered perspective appears explicitly in her writing three times – each time in association with the idea of constraint. With regards to Queen Christina, Elisabeth brings up the stereotypical representation of women as the weaker sex; Christina gives her, she writes, "the idea of a person so accomplished, who defends our sex from the imputation of imbecility and weakness that the pedants would have given it"[16] (p. 181). Elisabeth here rejects the presumption of women's weakness by presenting it as a form of pedantry; while it may be less widespread at the moment when she is writing (hence the use of the imperfect "soulaient" ["would have given it"]), it apparently still needs to be criticized.

22 And, in fact, this opinion seems still to carry a certain weight for Elisabeth herself, because she takes up for her own purposes the association of femininity with weakness, not as a social construction but as a physiological inevitability:

> Know thus that I have a body imbued with a large part of the weaknesses of my sex, so that it is affected very easily by the afflictions of the soul and has none of the strength to bring itself back into line, as it is of a temperament subject to obstructions and resting in an air which contributes strongly to this.[17] (p. 88-89)

23 The "weaknesses of my sex" merge here with other causes to emphasize the disparity between the movements of the body and those of the soul, thereby preventing the mastery of one by the other. These declarations echo the third mention of femininity in the letters, when Elisabeth seems to make reference to menstruation, which prevents her from traveling: "In addition, the curse of my sex keeps me from the contentment a voyage to Egmond would have brought me."[18] (p. 94)

24 One can see here that Elisabeth deploys her gendered body as an element in her portrait that serves to highlight not only her weakness and deficiency but the inferiority of her position in relationship to knowledge. This theme nonetheless remains rather discreet and intervenes in her writing only as one experience among others, much less salient than her presentation of the ailing body. Elisabeth reaches out to Descartes as a doctor of the body as well as of the soul, and reveals throughout the correspondence different symptoms, for which Descartes, in his answers, works to find a cure:

> I assure you that the doctors, who saw me every day and examined all the symptoms of my illness, did not in so doing find its cause, or order such helpful remedies, as you have done from afar.[19] (p. 88)

25 This fragile body obliges the mind that it shelters to run the risk of their mutual disappearance:

> If my life were entirely known to you, I think the fact that a sensitive mind, such as my own, has conserved itself for so long amidst so many difficulties, in a body so weak, would seem more strange to you [...]."[20] (p. 89)

26 Her portrait of herself is that of a woman whose bodily ailments impede her goal of putting into practice her philosophical principles; the physical dimension of the portrait is an essential part of the representation of her engagement in a shared research project. But it seems as if illness only works to emphasize the reality of the body as obstacle, a reality that exists even in health. Here is Elisabeth writing about a moment and a journey where she appears to be faring well:

> [...] the air here is so pure. I am here in much better health than I ever was in Holland. But I would not want to have been here always, since there is nothing but my books to prevent me from becoming completely stupid.[21] (p. 163)

27 The simple enjoyment of the healthy body does not represent, for her, the basis for an improved intellectual activity, but rather comes to signify the risk of being trapped within this body without the external aid of the book.

28 Whether she presents herself as a member of the court, as a woman, or as a person in more or less ill health, Elisabeth locates the physical dimension of experience on the side of impediments, ignorance, and stupidity. And she does this insistently, in a way that recalls the demand that she makes of Descartes. One could even say that this body, which bears such responsibility for the epithet of "ignorant" that Elisabeth ascribes to herself (we note here that she makes no reference to the age difference between herself and Descartes, which could function as a reason for this ignorance), becomes an essential part of her contribution to the philosophical exchange. In this exchange, Elisabeth stresses the experiences that become an obstacle to the practice of philosophy that she takes up. In this way, the representation of her ignorance becomes, for her interlocutor, an appeal, as well as a demand for greater philosophical rigor.

"Intractable": The Body as Appeal to Philosophy

29 Ignorance produced by the body thus becomes intractability, the resistance of experience to theory that Elisabeth asks Descartes to help her mitigate—a kind disobedience, to echo the definition of the term given by Furetière in his *Dictionnaire universel* of 1690: "Farouche, revêche, qui ne veut recevoir aucune instruction ni rendre d'obéissance."[22]

30 From this perspective, the very existence of the exchange between Descartes and Elisabeth can become an instance of the latter's intractability. In fact, the young woman first takes up the philosophical problem of the articulation of the body and soul with Regius, the Dutch philosopher and doctor. And it is Regius who advises her to approach Descartes. Thus one could say that, having resisted instruction from a first teacher, she turned to a second. Since Descartes is credited with greater authority, will she adopt a position of intellectual submission with him? The qualifier of "intractable" comes to reflect the considerable ambivalence of the place that she will occupy here: more than a humble representation of her failings and her inferiority, the term designates the force of an object that will not allow itself to be diminished, thereby constructing Elisabeth as a rather Cartesian figure of contestation and autonomous self-assertion.

31 In fact, her whole exchange with Descartes is fed by the intractability that she never ceases to reveal through her persistence:

> I would not dare to ask this of you if I did not know that you never leave a work imperfect and that in undertaking to teach a stupid person, such as myself, you are prepared for all the inconveniences that brings you. It is this which makes me continue and say to you that the reasons do not persuade me [...]."[23] (p. 123)

32 Descartes accepts her challenge, which pushes him into further retrenchment of his position, and is conscious of the possibilities for clarification that this resistance to his instruction brings. To return to a passage that has already been cited, he declares:

> I have a very great obligation to your Highness in that she, after having borne my explaining myself badly in my previous letter, concerning the question which it pleased her to propose to me, deigns again to have the patience to listen to me on the same matter [...].[24] (p. 69)

33 One would no doubt be wrong to see here only the rhetoric of politeness: in this formulation – one that transforms intractability into patience, and the mastery of knowledge into a pedagogical weakness – he recognizes the philosophical coherence of the questions raised by his interlocutor on the basis of her own experience – an experience wherein philosophy, like the doctor he has agreed to become, must find the touchstone of its theoretical constructs.

34 Placed as she is in this crucial position, Elisabeth demonstrates vis à vis Descartes an intellectual confidence that derives from this ambivalent intractability: we thus see her formulating more or less definitive judgements of the philosophical aptitudes of those around her: "[...] there is no one else here who is reasonable enough to understand [your works] [...]."[25] (p. 152) And we find her remarking, in the context of an encounter in Berlin, on "[...] the capability of the one I find to be the most reasonable of the doctors here, since he has a taste for your reasoning [...]."[26] (p. 156) Even as she affirms the dutifulness that makes her use an understanding of Descartes' œuvre as a gauge of intellectual quality, she establishes her own point of view and gives herself as a point of reference, thereby moving away from any position of inferiority that her avowal of ignorance may have implied.

35 Elisabeth's intractability expresses itself as an intellectual rigor that requires theory to take particularity into account[27]; this is the thrust of the request that she makes of Descartes from the beginning, and that she reiterates with such persistence: "[...] I ask you for a more precise definition of the soul than the one you give in your *Metaphysics.*"[28] (p. 62) But she does not just raise a set of questions: throughout the correspondence, she provides the material that is needed in order to arrive at answers. This evidence consists of her personal, even intimate, experience – most notably the experience by means of which she recognizes her body as an impediment to rational control over the course taken by her life.

36 This deployment of the self in the service of a shared search for truth meets two demands: that of the patient who awaits a cure from her doctor, and that of the philosopher who situates her singular experience in the more general content provided by scientific knowledge. This is the origin of the singular tone of an exchange where the narration of physical symptoms moves out of the therapeutic (and strictly private) register and acquires a more general purpose within the construction of knowledge. It is in this context that Elisabeth takes the risk of appearing insignificant – or obscene – by highlighting her intimate experience:

> I plan as well to be bled in a few days, because that has become a bad habit and I cannot change it without getting a headache. I would fear giving you a headache with this annoying account of myself, if your concern for my health had not brought me to it.[29] (p. 159)

37 She takes this risk because this kind of account is justified as a source of experimental data for scientific study, as she explains in another context:

> While we were walking through an oak wood, [...] we were overcome in an instant by a sort of redness over the whole body [...]. It is to be remarked that all the different remedies each imagined for an illness so new [...] served for nothing. I give you this account because I presume that in it you can find something to confirm some of your doctrines."[30] (p. 174)

38 In the portrait that she gives of herself, Elisabeth positions herself as an empiricist philosopher positing her individual experience as the foundation for universal scientific judgement, as do the other interlocutors of Descartes during this period, including Regius (her first interlocutor), Gassendi, and Hobbes[31].

39 In many senses, the correspondence bears witness to the priority given to experience. To cite only two passages, Elisabeth declares of the passions:

> For those who call the passions perturbations of the mind would persuade me that the force of the passions consists only in overwhelming and subjecting reason to them [sic], if experience did not show me that there are passions that do carry us to reasonable actions.[32] (p. 110-111)

40 And elsewhere: "[...] I have always found it better to avail myself of experience rather than reason, in matters that concern [civil life] [...]." (p. 134)[33] But Elisabeth's sensitivity to the stubborn resistance of experience in the face of metaphysics reveals itself most clearly in the means by which she transforms the ignorance produced by the body into an intractability for which the mind must account. At the same time as she expresses a lack of comprehension, she opens up another perspective by tirelessly affirming the objection to theory that her body, and her experience of her body, represent. She thus positions herself vis à vis Descartes, the putative holder of theoretical knowledge, as the bearer of kind of practical, pre-theoretical knowledge, which Descartes himself acknowledges as the impetus for new research.

41 Does Elisabeth actively presume the priority given to the body – a priority that gives her a certain status as an independent interlocutor – or does she endure it despite herself? In considering the body as an impediment, and in painting a portrait of herself as a woman struggling to overcome this obstacle, she displays her fundamental tendency to identify herself as a mind and to separate mind from body; this is a tendency that she describes as "rational":

> If I were able to profit, as you do, from everything that presents itself to my senses, I would divert myself without difficulty. It is at this moment that I feel the inconvenience of being but a little rational. For if I were not so at all, I would find pleasures in common with those among whom I must live and so be able to take this medicine and have it do something.[34] (p. 93-94)

42 In this passage, Elisabeth evokes the difficulty of putting into practice the following cure (that Descartes proposes):

> [...] your Highness [should clear] her mind entirely of all sorts of unhappy thoughts, and even also of all sorts of serious meditations concerning the sciences. She should occupy herself by imitating those who convince themselves they think of nothing in looking at the greenery of a wood, the colors of a flower, the flight of a bird, and such things that require no attention.[35] (p. 92)

43 Submerging thought in sensation in order to give the impression that the mind no longer operates; keeping to a minimum those moments of intellectual concentration that give access to a genuine grasp of the metaphysical separation of the two substances; relaxing the mind to enjoy its union with the body and the pleasures of the senses: such is the cure of Descartes the doctor.

44 Now if we set aside the more or less obligatory euphemism ("*a little* rational") that Elisabeth uses with her teacher to qualify her intellectual abilities, Elisabeth draws a portrait of herself as distinguished by her capacity for abstraction – a capacity that, we note in passing, isolates her both from her own body (with her difficulties in accessing the pleasures of the senses) and from the social body to which she belongs (with her difficulties in accessing the pleasures "in common with those among whom I must live"). At this point, the correspondence presents us with a paradox: Elisabeth gives an account of the "inconvenience" of being cut off from her body, and it is Descartes who nonetheless pushes her to cultivate the immersion of the mind in the body. A paradox, in the sense that it is Elisabeth, in their exchange, who highlights, as an argument against metaphysics, the status of this body and her irreducible experience of it.

45 Everything proceeds here as if Descartes, demonstrating a genuine therapeutic receptivity as well as a great deal of philosophical honesty, heard the appeal of Elisabeth despite her own unwillingness to formulate it as such[36]. Aware as he is of her potentially dangerous aptitude for metaphysics, he invites her to plunge herself into the body that she offers up to him in writing, rather than to separate herself from the body that is a source of so much complaint. But this is not to say that Elisabeth remains passive throughout this process. Let us not forget that this entire approach is conditioned by the representation of herself that she elaborates in writing.

46 The correspondence represents a site where the body is put into play even from a distance. This distance, which requires Elisabeth to articulate her physical reality in words, is perhaps the condition for the effectiveness of Descartes' therapeutic intervention:

> I assure you that the doctors, who saw me every day and examined all the symptoms of my illness, did not in so doing find its cause, or order such helpful remedies, as you have done from afar.[37] (p. 88)

47 Descartes had likewise noted the possibilities inherent in their epistolary relationship:

> [...] had I been able to be admitted the honor of paying you reverence [...], I would have had too many marvels to admire at the same time [...]. This would have made me less capable of responding to your Highness [...].[38] (p. 63)

48 This comment on the positive effects of neutralizing physical presence, far from being a simple piece of rhetorical gallantry, underscores the importance of written mediation, which represents for Elisabeth an opportunity to actively construct a representation of herself.

49 In conclusion, the history of philosophy recognizes the coherence and the philosophical scope of the correspondence between Descartes and the Princess Elisabeth[39]. We note here with interest how the self-portrait of the princess, with its emphasis on the body – both the social body to which she belongs, and the individual body that constitutes the human person – transforms the written articulation of her experience into a partial solution to the very problems posed by this experience. At once obstacle to thought and permanent appeal, the body represents a form of intractability that transforms ignorance into philosophical potential: what could be more Cartesian?

50 Stubbornly, and under the protection of the therapeutic tie that binds her to her mentor, Elisabeth has the courage to accept her body, notwithstanding her own "rational" character, and in doing so she makes of Descartes the anti-metaphysical instrument that she needs to make the leap that this integration of the body represents. She thus obliges the philosopher to move from a consideration of the metaphysical *ego* toward a

consideration of the whole human being who will become the subject of *The Passions of the Soul*[40]. We can find here an effect of Elisabeth's self-portrait, offered to Descartes in the correspondence, as an ignorant and intractable woman.

NOTES

1. English translations taken from *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes*, Lisa Shapiro ed. and trans., Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2007. All references to the correspondence in French are from: Descartes, *Correspondance avec Élisabeth et autres lettres*, Jean-Marie Beyssade and Michelle Beyssade ed. Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1989: "J'ai appris avec beaucoup de joie et de regret, l'intention que vous avez eue de me voir [...], touchée également de votre charité de vous vouloir communiquer à une personne ignorante et indocile, et du malheur qui m'a dérobé une conversation si profitable. [...] La honte de vous montrer un style si déréglé m'a empêchée jusqu'ici de vous demander cette faveur par lettre." May 16, 1643, p. 65.

2. "La faveur dont Votre Altesse m'a honoré en me faisant recevoir ses commandements par écrit, est plus grande que je n'eusse jamais osé espérer." May 21, 1643, p. 67.

3. "Vous connaissant le meilleur médecin pour [mon âme], je vous découvre si librement les faiblesses de ces spéculations, et espère qu'en observant le serment d'Hippocrate, vous y apporterez des remèdes, sans les publier.", May 16, 1643, p. 66.

4. "En relisant ce que je vous mande de moi-même, je m'aperçois que j'oublie une de vos maximes, qui est de ne mettre jamais rien par écrit, qui puisse être mal interprété de lecteurs peu charitables. Mais je me fie tant au soin de M. de Palotti, que je sais que ma lettre vous sera bien rendue, et à votre discrétion, que vous l'ôterez, par le feu, du hasard de tomber en mauvaises mains.", May 24, 1645, p. 100.

5. "J'ai examiné le chiffre que vous m'avez envoyé et le trouve fort bon, mais trop prolixe pour écrire tout un sens; et si on n'écrit que peu de paroles, on les trouverait par la quantité de lettres [...].", October 10, 1646, p. 184.

6. "J'ai très grande obligation à Votre Altesse de ce que, après avoir éprouvé que je me suis mal expliqué en mes précédentes [...], elle daigne encore avoir la patience de m'entendre sur le même sujet [i.e. éclaircir l'articulation entre les trois notions primitives que sont l'âme, le corps, et l'union de l'âme et du corps]. Ce qui est, comme je crois, toute la matière que Votre Altesse m'a ici prescrite.", June 28, 1643, p. 73.

7. "n'a pas sujet de disposer de sa personne", November 29, 1646, p. 189.

8. "[...] je relâcherais [ma résolution] de retourner [en Hollande], si les intérêts de ma maison ne m'y rappellent, et attendrai plutôt ici que l'issue des traités de Munster ou quelque autre conjoncture me ramène en ma patrie.", May 1647, p. 205.

9. "[...] je ne vois point que Madame l'Électrice, ma tante, soit en humeur de permettre mon retour [...].", April 11, 1647, p. 200.

10. "[...] fausses louanges [...] en un lieu où la façon ordinaire de converser m'a accoutumé d'en entendre des personnes incapables d'en donner de véritables [...]", June 20, 1643, p. 71.

11. "Tantôt les intérêts de ma maison, que je ne dois négliger, tantôt les entretiens et complaisances, que je ne peux éviter, m'abattent si fort ce faible esprit de fâcherie ou d'ennui,

qu'il se rend, pour longtemps après, inutile à tout autre chose: qui servira, comme j'espère, d'excuse à ma stupidité, de ne pouvoir comprendre[...]", June 20, 1743, p. 71.

12. "Mais j'admire qu'il est possible à cette princesse de s'appliquer à l'étude comme elle fait, et aux affaires de son royaume aussi, deux occupations si différentes, qui demandent chacune une personne entière.", December 4, 1649, p. 236.

13. "Il y a huit jours que la mauvaise humeur d'un frère malade m'empêche de vous faire cette requête[...]." August 16, 1645, p. 111.

14. "[...] je suis contrainte de céder aux lois impertinentes de la civilité qui sont établies, pour ne m'acquérir point d'ennemis. Depuis que j'écris celle-ci, j'ai été interrompue plus de sept fois [...].", September 30, 1645, p. 137. See also April 25, 1646, p. 164: "I have been interrupted so often in writing you that I am constrained to send you my rough draft [...]". (p. 134) ["J'ai été si souvent interrompue, en vous écrivant, que je suis contrainte de vous envoyer mon brouillon .[...]"]; October 1646, p. 184: "I have so little leisure to write here that I am constrained to send you this draft, in which you can see from the difference in pens all the times I have been interrupted." (p. 147) ["J'ai ici si peu de loisir à écrire, que je suis contrainte de vous envoyer ce brouillon, où vous pouvez remarquer, à la différence de la plume, toutes les fois que j'ai été interrompue."]

15. "Mais j'avoue que je trouve de la difficulté à séparer des sens et de l'imagination des choses qui y sont continuellement représentées par discours et par lettres, que je ne saurais éviter sans pécher contre mon devoir.", June 22, 1645, p. 104.

16. "l'idée d'une personne si accomplie, qui affranchit notre sexe de l'imputation d'imbécilité et de faiblesse que MM. les pédants lui soulaient donner", December 4, 1649, p. 236.

17. "Sachez donc que j'ai le corps imbu d'une grande partie des faiblesses de mon sexe, qu'il se ressent très facilement des afflictions de l'âme, et n'a point la force de se remettre avec elle, étant d'un tempérament sujet aux obstructions et demeurant en un air qui y contribue fort.", May 24, 1645, p. 98.

18. "Avec cela, la malédiction de mon sexe m'empêche le contentement que me donnerait un voyage vers Egmont.", June 22, 1645, p. 105.

19. "Et je vous assure que les médecins, qui me virent tous les jours et examinèrent tous les symptômes de mon mal, n'en ont pas trouvé la cause, ni ordonné de remèdes si salutaires que vous avez fait de loin.", May 24, 1645, p. 99.

20. "Et je pense que, si ma vie vous était entièrement connue, vous trouveriez plus étrange qu'un esprit sensible, comme le mien, s'est conservé si longtemps, parmi tant de traverses, dans un corps si faible [...]", May 24, 1645, p. 99.

21. "[...] l'air y est fort pur. J'y ai aussi plus de santé que je n'avais en Hollande. Mais je ne voudrais pas y avoir toujours été, puisqu'il n'y a rien que mes livres pour m'empêcher de devenir stupide au dernier point.", May 1647, p. 207.

22. Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel contenant généralement tous les mots françois, tant vieux que modernes, & les termes de toutes les sciences et des arts*, 1690.

23. "Je n'oserais vous en prier, si je ne savais que vous ne laissez point d'œuvre imparfaite, et qu'en entreprenant d'enseigner une personne stupide, comme moi, vous vous êtes préparé aux incommodités que cela vous apporte. C'est ce qui me fait continuer à vous dire, que je ne suis point persuadée [...].", October 28, 1645, p. 148.

24. "J'ai très grande obligation à Votre Altesse de ce que, après avoir éprouvé que je me suis mal expliqué en mes précédentes, touchant la question qu'il lui a plu de me proposer, elle daigne encore avoir la patience de m'entendre sur le même sujet [...].", June 28, 1643, p. 73.

25. "[...] il n'y a personne ici d'assez raisonnable pour comprendre [vos œuvres] [...]", November 29, 1646, p. 191.

26. "[...] la capacité de celui que je trouve le plus raisonnable entre les doctes de ce lieu, puisqu'il est capable de goûter votre raisonnement [...].", February 21, 1647, p. 196.

27. On this point, see the article of Delphine Kolesnik-Antoine, "Élisabeth philosophe: un cartésianisme empirique," in *Élisabeth de Bohême face à Descartes: deux philosophes?*, Delphine Kolesnik-Antoine and Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin eds., Paris, Vrin, 2015, which shows how Elisabeth requires Descartes to " [...] affronter la question de la possibilité de faire une science du particulier. [...] A plusieurs reprises, Elisabeth oppose ainsi à Descartes son cas ou son expérience particulière et s'interroge sur la capacité de la règle générale à rendre raison des contre-exemples qu'elle valorise (en elle, la tristesse diminue l'appétit, etc.)" (p. 128); thus, "le bât a donc constamment blessé, pour Elisabeth, sur la même question de savoir comment la philosophie nouvelle, dans sa double dimension métaphysique et physiologique, est susceptible de rendre raison des particularités des expériences quotidiennes que tout un chacun peut faire de son incarnation" (p. 131).

28. "[...] je vous demande une définition de l'âme plus particulière qu'en votre métaphysique", May 16, 1643, p. 65**.**

29. "Je prétends aussi me faire saigner en peu de jours, puisque j'en ai pris une mauvaise coutume, que je ne saurais changer à cette heure sans en être incommodée du mal de tête. J'aurais peur de vous en donner par ce fâcheux récit de moi-même, si votre soin de ma santé ne m'y avait portée.", April 11, 1647, p. 201.

30. "En nous promenant sous un bois de chêne,[...]il nous est venu en un instant une sorte de rougeole par tout le corps [...]. Et il est à remarquer que tous les différents remèdes que chacun s'est imaginé pour un mal si nouveau, [...] n'y ont rien servi. Je vous en fais le récit, parce que je présume que vous y trouverez de quoi confirmer quelques-unes de vos doctrines.", August 23, 1648, p. 224.

31. On the relationship of Elisabeth's arguments to the philosophy of the period, see Delphine Kolesnik-Antoine, *op. cit.* She situates the thought of the princess in the framework of the "[...] relations complexes et évolutives entre ce cartésianisme et le champ de la 'nouvelle philosophie,' qui regroupe Descartes et Bacon, Gassendi ou Hobbes, c'est-à–dire ceux qui s'opposent à la scolastique sans cependant tomber dans la croyance aux fantômes (le néoplatonisme ou l'hermétisme). [...] Il est donc possible [...] de dégager des filiations entre ses arguments et d'autres arguments antérieurs, et de singulariser le type de question qu'elle pose. Incontestablement, ses objections se rattachent à la mouvance 'matérialiste' des objecteurs proches de Mersenne, de Gassendi, de Hobbes et de Regius" (p. 127-128).

32. "Ceux qui les nomment perturbations de l'âme, me persuaderaient que leur force ne consiste qu'à éblouir et soumettre la raison, si l'expérience ne me montrait qu'il y en a qui nous portent aux actions raisonnables.", September 13, 1645, p. 130.

33. "[...] touchant la vie particulière, [...] je me suis toujours mieux trouvée de me servir de l'expérience que de la raison [...]", April 25, 1646, p. 164.

34. "Si je pouvais profiter, comme vous faites, de tout ce qui se présente à mes sens, je me divertirais, sans peiner [mon esprit]. C'est à cette heure que je sens l'incommodité d'être un peu raisonnable. Car si je ne l'étais point du tout, je trouverais des plaisirs communs avec ceux entre lesquels il me faut vivre, pour prendre cette médecine avec profit.", June 22, 1645, p. 102.

35. "[...] il se faut entièrement délivrer l'esprit de toutes sortes de pensées tristes, et même aussi de toutes sortes de méditations touchant les sciences, et ne s'occuper qu'à imiter ceux qui, en regardant la verdeur d'un bois, les couleurs d'une fleur, le vol d'un oiseau, et telles choses qui ne requièrent aucune attention, se persuadent qu'ils ne pensent à rien.", May or June 1645, p. 102.

36. On the role played here by Descartes, see Yaelle Sibony-Malpertu, "Descartes thérapeute", *La clinique lacanienne* , n°19, 1/2011, p. 159-174.

37. "Et je vous assure que les médecins, qui me virent tous les jours et examinèrent tous les symptômes de mon mal, n'en ont pas trouvé la cause, ni ordonné de remèdes si salutaires que vous avez fait de loin.", May 24, 1645, p. 98.

38. "[...] si j'eusse pu être admis à l'honneur de vous faire la révérence [...], j'aurais eu trop de merveilles à admirer en même temps [...]. Ce qui m'eût rendu moins capable de répondre à votre altesse [...]", May 21, 1643, p. 67.

39. Recent research around the correspondence bears witness to the latter's philosophical significance, including most notably all the contributions to the volume (cited above) *Élisabeth de Bohême face à Descartes: deux philosophes?*, *op. cit.*

40. Jean-Marie Beyssade makes the case thusly in the introduction to his edition of the *Correspondence*, *op. cit.*, p. 29-31: "La correspondance entre Descartes et Elisabeth marque une péripétie dans la philosophie cartésienne, le dernier mouvement par quoi elle s'est révélée à elle-même[...]. C'est l'ego qui accède à sa forme ultime [...]. L'homme prend le premier rang, non point comme substance, mais comme personne."

ABSTRACTS

Depicting herself, in the correspondence with Descartes, as an "ignorant and intractable" woman, Elisabeth, Princess of Bohemia, places a high priority on the body — a body that is at once, as a source of ignorance, an obstacle to the philosophical process, and, as a reality that resists theory, an unavoidable challenge to this same process. She thus obliges the philosopher to move from a consideration of the metaphysical *ego* toward a consideration of the human being who will become the subject of *The Passions of the Soul*.

En faisant d'elle-même, dans sa correspondance avec Descartes, un portrait en femme « ignorante et indocile », la princesse Élisabeth y fait valoir l'expérience de son corps à la fois comme obstacle à la démarche philosophique en tant que facteur d'ignorance, et comme incontournable défi pour cette même démarche, en tant que réalité résistant à la théorie. Ses questions conduiront Descartes à repenser l'articulation de l'âme et du corps à partir de leur union dans la personne humaine, ce dont témoigneront *Les passions de l'âme*.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Descartes, Élisabeth de Bohême, expérience, corps, féminin

AUTHORS

HÉLÈNE BAH OSTROWIECKI

Université Paris-Est, LISAA. EA 4120, UPEM